

What didn't the Etruscans do for us?

Judith Swaddling

Research into the Etruscans is now one of the most exciting areas of archaeology to be involved in, and the popularity of this fascinating people is increasing rapidly as we learn more and more about them. Some writers still describe the Etruscans as mysterious but that is largely because they find mysteries appealing. Since Etruscan literature has not survived, in our text-driven society Etruscan civilization has tended to be overlooked in favour of the Greek and Roman worlds. Study of the Etruscans, however, encourages a much wider approach using a variety of disciplines, including archaeology, history, art and architecture, epigraphy, technological and sociological study, and Greek and Roman literary references.

Where did they live and where did they come from?

The Etruscans were a powerful people who controlled not only ancient Etruria (roughly equivalent to modern Tuscany and northern Lazio), but also a large part of Campania and the Po Valley. There is evidence of their culture as far west as Marseilles and as far east as the coast of the Black Sea. The Etruscans were influenced by the Greeks in many respects, but they can only be regarded as derivative in the sense that any culture takes from others what it wants or needs and uses it in its own distinctive way. The distinctive culture of the Etruscans themselves profoundly influenced the Romans, and thus indirectly western civilization down to the present day.

It is now widely accepted that the Etruscans were indigenous to Italy. They did not suddenly migrate there in the eighth century B.C. as Herodotus suggested, rather there is a continuous archaeological tradition that dates their precursors back at least to the second millennium B.C. Their early history is therefore concurrent with the Myceneans and there are Mycenaean finds from Italy. What makes the Etruscans stand out from the 700s onwards is the technological advances which allowed them to exploit the rich metal ores in their territory. Situated at the crossroads of the Mediterranean, and powerful at sea, they traded extensively with Greeks, Phoenicians, Egyptians and Syrians, importing a host of luxury goods, exporting along with copper and iron their own characteristic black/grey bucchero pottery, and possibly participating in the slave-trade.

Deciphering the language

Contrary to popular belief, we can read Etruscan. It is a unique, non-Indo-European language, written in letters based on the west Greek alphabet. The Etruscans adapted letters of the alphabet learned from Greeks who settled at Cuma (Kyme) near Naples. Ironically, far more Etruscan inscriptions survive from the early period in Italy than early Greek inscriptions in Greece. Writing came via the Etruscans to Rome and thence to central and western Europe. Some words of Etruscan confirming this transmission have passed down through the Roman language to us, for example to do with writing – *elementum* for a letter of the alphabet, *litterae* for writing, *stilus* for writing implement and *cera* for wax (tablet). Another survival is 'person' from *Phersu*, a key performer in drama: the Etruscans were keen theatre-goers.

Over 10,000 inscriptions survive but with only a few excep-

tions they are very short. With only a little knowledge it is quite easy to read short inscriptions written on objects – such as 'labels' of gods or goddesses incised on mirror backs or graffiti on pottery, or names and other details of owners on grave goods.

Poets, prophets, and potters

In antiquity the Etruscans were famed for their love of music (they appear to have invented the brass ensemble!), for being a deeply religious people, for their exquisite metalwork, and for the high status and wealth to which women could aspire. The fact that women dined in public with their husbands and attended sports and festivals was frowned upon by contemporary Greeks and Romans. From Etruscan art, it is clear that the Etruscans were the first to place emphasis on the male/female couple or partnership, a fundamental aspect of their own and later society.

The Etruscans made prophecies based on natural phenomena such as animal livers and the flight of birds, convinced that the microcosm reflected the macrocosm. The Romans set great store by the Etruscan books of prophecy that they were consulted down to the sixth century A.D.

The Etruscans were brilliant metalworkers and their bronze figurines were prized by the Romans. The exquisite filigree and granulation on their jewellery (decoration by fine wire and minute gold globules) has never been equalled. The Romans learned from the Etruscans about irrigation, surveying, road and temple building. It is now believed that the emergence of cities in Italy is contemporary with and may even pre-date the earliest cities in Greece.

Like the Greeks the Etruscans produced both black- and red-figured pottery but they are best known for their native lustrous black/grey bucchero ware. Bucchero shapes both influenced and were influenced by Greek pottery. Bucchero can be classified both by date and place of production and is decorated in various ways, the finest being extremely thin-walled and elegant. The Etruscans were avid collectors of Athenian pottery and far more Athenian pots of the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. have been found in the rich tombs of Etruria than on Greek soil, so much so that in the nineteenth century these wares were actually thought to be Etruscan. This is why the Wedgwood 'Etruria' pottery factory was so-named, despite the fact that its influence was ultimately Greek.

Housing the living; housing the dead

Most excavation of Etruscan sites has revolved around the tombs as the city remains tend to be buried beneath medieval and later settlements. Until recently the most extensive urban excavation was of Marzabotto near Bologna where an impressive layout of streets and houses in grid formation testifies to an advanced knowledge of building and surveying from the sixth century B.C. onwards. Recent excavations at Cerveteri and Orvieto, and newly discovered remains of a hitherto unknown city at Prato near Florence are gradually telling us more about Etruscan urbanisation. There is also much activity regarding rural settlements.

Goods placed in tombs tell us much about life in Etruria, and

the tombs themselves often resemble contemporary houses set out in street formation. Changing burial customs at Cerveteri or Chiusi make fascinating studies. The tomb paintings are what many people think of in connection with Etruria, and many show the Etruscans themselves in their favourite pastimes of feasting, enjoying music and sport, hunting and fishing. They obviously hoped to continue these pastimes in the next world, though as the centuries pass by optimism about the afterlife is replaced with visions of torment and demons as Etruscan fortunes waned.

The end of the Etruscans?

From the fifth century B.C. Etruscan history is intertwined in either enmity or friendship with that of Greeks, Samnites, Gauls and Romans. The Etruscans, with their famous prophecies, were actually believed to have foretold their own downfall, believing that their civilization would last for eight saecula (or 'ages'). True or not, in reality they lacked the military organization and political unity of the Romans and in turn each Etruscan city fell to them so that by 280 B.C. all had lost their independence, and after the Social War of 91–89 B.C. they were granted Roman citizenship. It is clear, however, that a number of Etruscan families still flourished as some Etruscan men continued to hold high office. In the longer term, regard for Etruscan wisdom, heritage and technology was to transcend the centuries.

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